

By KEITH L. MARTIN

The "zero tolerance" controversy in Duxbury over the last school year was not just keenly followed by those around town, but also miles away in South Burlington, Vermont.

Rice Memorial High School Headmaster John McCarthy had the difficult decision of moving his family of four to Massachusetts, if offered a position at Duxbury High School, or remain in Vermont where he had spent the last five years respected by students and staff.

Where some would see a situation to avoid, McCarthy

saw a prime opportunity to use his skills where they were needed.

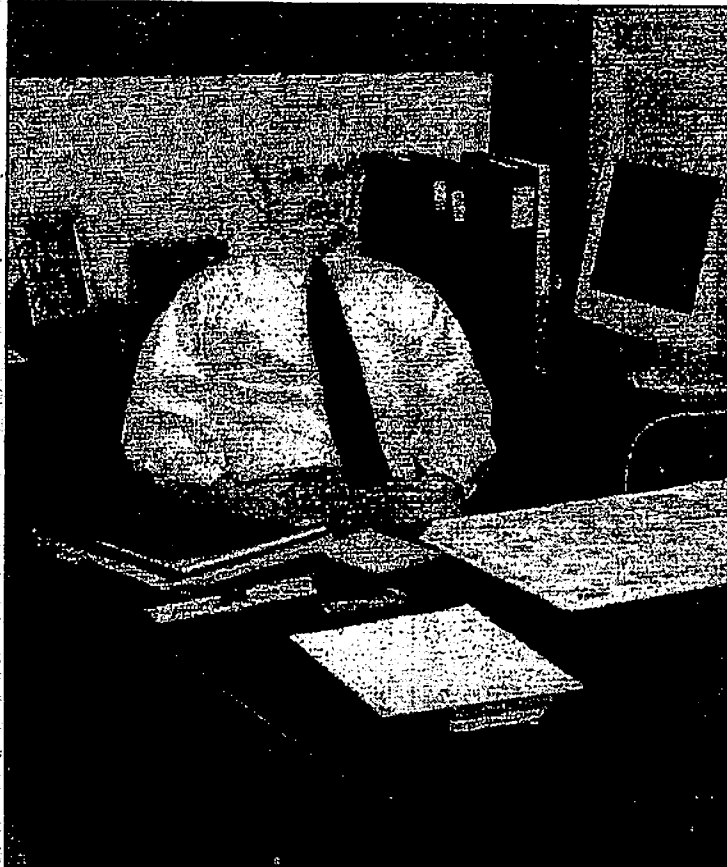
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McCarthy Ready for the Challenge

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"I felt I was a good match with the school and attracted by the turmoil of last year," he said. "I see one of my strengths as looking at how things work and finding ways to improve those things that aren't working. I saw the opportunity to come into a school and try to heal the wounds of what's happening and help get the school on track."

Upon first learning he was a finalist, McCarthy read news articles and op/ed pieces on the *Clipper's* website to learn more about the school. What he found was a school district with high standards and expectations for its schools – something he firmly believes in – as well as a district he saw looking to improve an already impressive list of scholastic achievements.



McCarthy is comfortable in his new office and new role at DHS.

in April, McCarthy accepted the position as principal and has at least two reasons for making sure DHS remains a top school for students — his daughter Kate, a senior, and son Jack, a sophomore.

"People are happy I have children in the school and that I can identify with parents and the issues they face — I'm not just an administrator," he said.

McCarthy can also identify with substance abuse among students, an issue he met head-on at Rice Memorial.

McCarthy said that when he arrived at the school, he discovered a fairly significant problem with drugs and alcohol and that the school had to come together because it was affecting the climate in the hallways.

After making changes to school policy and hiring a full-time drug/alcohol counselor, McCarthy turned next to those not using substances to enlist their help in improving their school's atmosphere.

"I tried to empower non-users in the school, which is big because I wanted students to have zero tolerance for certain behaviors," said McCarthy. "In my opinion, zero tolerance is only effective when students have zero tolerance for certain behavior."

McCarthy worked hard with peer mentors and student leaders to change the climate of the school, so students would neither tolerate substance abuse nor look the other way. As a prime example last year, captains of the school's successful football team turned in their starting running back, which resulted in his suspension from the team for two weeks.

"That shows you the climate changed with students," said McCarthy. "Five years ago, that would have never happened."

Those that worked alongside McCarthy in Vermont credit him for the turnaround in student life.

"John was the key to the whole thing," said Lloyd Hulburd, assistant principal at Rice Memorial. "We've come a long way, but like other schools we still have problems. But we are a safer school because of John's efforts."

Hulburd, who worked alongside McCarthy for five years, said McCarthy did not just focus on punishment but repairing harm to kids involved with alcohol and drugs.

"The goal was not just to catch kids, but to help them and their families," said Hulburd.

Now in Duxbury, McCarthy sees a similar approach working at his new school. With a new policy in place, his goal will be to help teens in trouble and get those outside the school involved in improving the culture at DHS.

"It needs to be a community effort to solve the problem," said McCarthy. "Parents are obviously the key ingredient and can make a difference, so we may need parent education programs, and we need the police's involvement to work with us as well."

McCarthy also stresses the need for Duxbury's teens to have something to do when the final schoolbell rings in the afternoon. With organized programs in place, this leaves less time to hang around and possibly get in trouble.

His strong focus on students and their success is something Superintendent of Schools Eileen Williams said stands out in McCarthy's character.

"He has high standards for students and those standards come from a strong belief that kids are capable of achieving and doing the right thing," she said. "He'll try to support the student and family during what can be very difficult years of maturity."

Williams also said that McCarthy reminds her of another school administrator she knew years ago when she was a superintendent in Raynham — his father, Jack McCarthy. The elder McCarthy was superintendent for the town of Swansea and was one of the first school administrators to face the issue of a student with AIDS wanting to attend public school when many in the community found it too risky.

"He essentially stood up in front of the community and advocated for the student to attend school and he did," said Williams. "He paved the way for the rest of us in the state to deal with such issues. John couldn't have had a clearer advocate for children as a role model."

As the younger McCarthy watched his father take this stance, he said he learned an important lesson he utilizes today as an administrator.

"I learned that you have to make decisions that are unpopular, but you should always base those decisions on good information and what you believe is right in your heart," said McCarthy. "If you stick to what is in the best interest of the kids, generally you'll be successful."